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AUTHOR Lieberman, Janet E.
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ABSTRACT

The community history program described in this report uses traveling photographic exhibits and accompanying booklets on themes of social and urban history, work, housing, entertainment, family, and transportation, to involve the people of Queens, New York, in an examination of their community's past. The program's philosophy is discussed first, involving a commitment to: (1) community outreach through the placement of exhibits in bank lobbies, factories, churches, and other public places; (2) citizen involvement through contributions of family documents and photographs; (3) the discovery of previously unknown historical facts; and (4) the provision of special learning packages for non-English speakers and the visually and hearing impaired. After describing an example of an exhibit and learning package which traced the working lives of three individuals between the years 1880 and 1945, the paper outlines the creation of an exhibit, focusing on locating and collecting historical memorabilia; selecting material for exhibits; gathering appropriate literary quotations that can place the photographs and documents in a broader humanities context; writing a brochure; preparing materials for presentation; and installing the exhibit itself. Next, the paper describes the community seminars which are held two weeks after the exhibit has been installed to provide a broader historical context. Finally, the paper discusses staffing requirements. (JP)

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EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES FOR A CHANGING SOCIETY:
TEACHING AND REACHING THE COMMUNITY.

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Paper presented at the "Educational Alternatives for a
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"EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES FOR A CHANGING SOCIETY"

Teaching and Reaching the Community

Janet E. Lieberman
January 30, 1981
Miami, Florida

In a recent AAHE Bulletin, Patricia Cross, the guru of innovation, suggested that our colleges face two possible strategies. The first scenario views the future from "the fixed institutional positions of the present"; the second envisions new structures and expanded implementation. Our presence here today proves that we have opted for the second approach.

Given that, according to Dr. Cross, we have to ask new questions: "What is the changing role of education in the society?" Her answer is that education has been blending into the lives of people and into the organization of society. As this happens, attitudes and values change. One significant aspect of this change is how rapidly the delivery of educational services is changing.

The program I am going to describe exemplifies those principles-- it represents a new delivery approach to a different audience with an interdisciplinary format and an unusual community component.

We have just completed a program, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, entitled Community History. It is an interdisciplinary program featuring social history, literature and ethics. The program's goal is to teach out of school people about the history of their community, with appropriate literature references and ethical questions. Briefly, what we do is to create travelling photographic exhibits and accompanying booklets, which we call learning packages. The exhibit (20 to 30 photographs)

is placed in a different public space every month. The packages are used in seminars/discussion groups about the theme of the exhibit. In addition, we hold the two hour seminar, where we use our learning package to expand upon the theme of the exhibit.

Our choice of site is an exciting aspect. We have held photographic exhibits in two airports, OTB parlors, bank lobbies, hospital waiting rooms, factories, churches, subway stations, and store fronts. We go wherever the people are. We choose topics of interest to the public we are trying to reach: Work, Transportation, Leisure, Housing and Family.

The community that we are reaching is primarily those people in Queens who are not going to museums, historical societies, libraries, or the myriad of cultural events in New York City. We have discovered that amidst the cultural plenty of New York City, millions of people are not going to the Museum of the City of New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the New York Public Library, to name but three. Thus what we do is bring our exhibits to sites that will catch these people on their way to work, to shop, to pray or to wherever they are going. The people we are trying to work with, we believe, will become quite interested in history if history is brought to their space rather than insisting that they come to our place. Thus we hang our exhibits in the lobby of a bank, the community room of a church, the cafeteria of a factory, the waiting room of an airport, the lobby of an office building, the waiting room of a funeral parlor, or the store windows of a major shopping street.

In addition to selecting what could be labelled unusual sites, we also involve the community by asking and encouraging them to

participate in the research process. (Show mail backs.) All of our exhibits contain documents from the private collections of people in the community. For example, the pictures in the learning package on Transportation are not only from the leading local historian of Queens County, but also contain contributions from local realtors, Senior Citizens, and the son of a woman who was elected the Queen of the Queensborough Bridge in 1909.

Many of the pictures in our working people exhibit were obtained through a contest we ran where people were asked to submit pictures of friends or relatives working in Western Queens before 1945. Prize money from a local merchant provided free dinners for the winners, in addition to a place in our 1980 calendar. (The Work Package includes documents from the closets, basements and attics of three people who are in the exhibit.) More specifically, during the seminar we discuss with the group each document in the package, the story behind it, and elicit the group's reaction to the document. My point here is that not only do the seminar materials and exhibit photographs come from the community, but it is formed from them and for them into themes that they can relate to - Transportation, Work, Housing, Leisure, Family.

This partnership not only insures community involvement but also unearths heretofore unknown documents in Social History. The message of our program is that we need help from the community to tell the history of these unknown people. Even when we have selected the focus and the documents for our exhibit and package we encourage people at the seminars and those who view our exhibits to bring in more documents.

But there is more to the story of bringing history into the community than just placing exhibits in peoples' paths, and involving them in the research process. The exhibit and the seminar packages must be in their language. Many times this means translating exhibit narratives into Italian, Spanish, and Greek. We have also learned that the format of the exhibit paragraphs must be in journalistic language with the newspaper layout of headlines and subheadlines. For those people who are visually impaired we provide cassette tapes of the exhibit and the documents package. For the deaf we always have an interpreter standing next to me at all seminars. Clearly at the heart of our program is the belief that people learn by being involved and realizing that we are sensitive to their needs whether it be a Senior Citizens group working with us for a morning identifying 50 photographs or a young adult uncovering a collection of documents about the black community in her neighbor's family album -- History in the community, to us, means a partnership with the community.

One exhibit and package has the work experience as its focus. The exhibit, like our 1980 Community History Calendar, is pictures of people in Western Queens at their jobs, between 1880 and 1945. The accompanying package develops the work history of three of the people in the exhibit. Through pictures, work records and public documents, the work history of these three people and their families are developed. In both the exhibit and the package, excerpts from novels and poems and ethical questions enrich the story. (Show package, brochure, and calendar.)

For example, the first family in the Working People package is represented by a selection of documents from the scrapbooks and

family album of Mrs. Nancy Aaron. Through these documents, during the seminar, we reconstruct the work history of a middle class black family that arrived in Queens in 1880. The group is led through the saga of three generations of black men that fought in the Civil War, World War I, and World War II, facing a segregated work space -- the Army and Navy in all three wars. The documents also reveal the strong fiber of the black family where both heads of the household are working full time.

The second set of documents in our seminar relate to the Manyoky Family -- a story of the apprenticeship system in the Steinway Piano factory. In this data set the participants discover Jess Manyoky, how he learned how to be a "Voicer" from his father and the changes that took place in his work life from 1928 through the depression years and World War II.

The third family discussed in the seminar on the Work Experience is the Geipel family. In this set of documents, from the private collection of Dora Geipel, came the fascinating story of the life of her grandmother -- Wilhemenia Geipel -- a midwife in late nineteenth century Queens. In the documents of Wilhemenia Geipel, through her meticulous record keeping, participants in the seminar learn about her work, her tools, her credentialling process, and her relationship to the German community.

The contents of the package are designed to provide motivating tasks, and instructional kits with material which integrates the study of literature with community history and illustrates linkages to the broader themes in American Social History with suggestions for follow up activities to be done at home. The package is designed for initial use by an historian or literary expert and

for follow up activities to be led by librarians, lay leaders of church groups, shop stewards, union groups, and individuals curious about their own neighborhood. The potential impact of the history packages is to provide primary source material and activities which encourage involvement and learning in Community History; to motivate participants to take the material home and share it with family and friends; and to disseminate a knowledge of source material to the public.

The process begins by searching our network for people who have either memories, or documents dating back to the building of the bridge, 1909.

Two years of "networking" have resulted in a cooperative core of people who enjoy participating in the project. One is a collector of transportation photos, facts, maps, and newspaper clippings. Another remembers being wheeled across the bridge at age 2; she shares her accounts of the growth of the community and identifies other sources of potential information.

One researcher and two student assistants follow up all leads. Each lead is exhaustively followed through to provide the ultimate linkages.

As the material accumulates, the project director supervises two activities: one, the gathering of research and two, the selection and evaluation of material for exhibits. Given a broad base of community support, it takes about four weeks to gather enough material. For example, in an exhibit on working people we sent out researchers to unearth pictures of people employed in local factories with a 60-90 year history in the area. Pictures of women at work in 1903, 1910 and of men in the Steinway factory in 1906 resulted.

One black family had records, mortgages, pictures, birth certificates, army records, pay records, etc. going back to 1886. The project director goes with a photographer to the home and on the spot photographs are taken. These documents and photographs become the basic material used in the photographic exhibit and in the learning package designed to teach the seminar participants. The project tailors each exhibit and seminar to the particular locality in which the presentation is made. On the back of each picture, we type all the historical citation germane to the photograph; this information forms the basis for discussion.

As the material surfaces, the consultants on ethics and literature search for appropriate quotations, stories or poetry to integrate the historical material into the broader humanities context. Conferences with these consultants continue throughout the development phase of the project to guarantee a cohesive approach. The learning package contains selections for seminar discussion and a related unit for reading and sharing with friends and family. There are pictures, games, advertisements, selections from literature and always some historical text excerpt to assure the academic context of the subject.

Two weeks before the exhibit is hung, Dr. Lieberman makes final selection of photographs to be displayed in a public setting: bank, church, corporation, senior citizen home, etc. A graphic expert designs the exhibit and a brochure with a tear off for response or a postcard to be returned. We select material for the learning package, choosing from a wealth of items uncovered in our research. The criteria for the selection are historical interest, potentiality for humanities integration, visual appeal,

and local involvement. Scrupulous effort guarantees that the material does not use professional jargon, but provides selections in words of common usage.

The next step is preparing the raw materials for presentation. Staff assistants oversee production of plates necessary for reproducing the pictures for the learning package. The photographs are enlarged and mounted. Research and writing provide the captions. After they are written, we translate them into four languages. The graphics consultant designs a folder for the package and appropriate titles. In addition, the literature and ethics consultants review the selection and provide related material. The project directors and consultants discuss the themes and the composition of the learning package as well as related activities which are a part of the package. In our exhibit on working people, the theme focused on apprenticeship, women at work, segregation at work, risk-taking, local industry and changes in working conditions. We included a quotation from Girl of the Streets by Hart Crane and a selection from Whyte's "The Organization Man" to enhance the learning.

At this point in the process, we also arrange to make a recording for the blind participants, which describes all the visual material.

Next we travel to the site and hang the exhibit. Our consultant in graphics directs the hanging of the photographs and supervises the installation of the exhibit. Installation usually takes about three hours. We aim to have the exhibit placed at least two weeks before the seminar. That lead time allows the public the opportunity to look at the pictures, study the captions and become familiar with the thematic emphasis. The stimulation

and the time interval serve to raise curiosity. During the time of the exhibit, evaluators go to the site and interview the people looking at the pictures to determine their reactions.

Following that interval, Dr. Lieberman leads a seminar with about 30 community residents. In that presentation, he shows what historians do by examples of how to reconstruct history from documents, "read a picture," date a picture, analyze an advertisement. He also discusses the material in the learning package and suggests activities to be done at home.

The package of material supplied to the participants offers a wide range of sources for community history, such as photographs, artifacts, published materials, federal and local government documents, family records, church records and work records. At the seminar Dr. Lieberman introduces the audience to the techniques of historical research and to the recent insights of the discipline. The emphasis is on contradicting the stereotypes with historical fact and on encouraging the audience to participate in the search for artifacts and documents.

One aim of the seminar is to provide the broader historical context for the microcosm that the documents illustrate. To accomplish this the introductory remarks include a succinct summary of historical development relevant to interpretations of the package materials. Wherever possible, the seminar leader tries to elicit historical background information from the audience. The emphasis is on discussion, not lecture.

In a day to day framework, how does the implementation work? There is a project director, working 7 days a week, about 10 hours a day, spending inordinate amounts of time on the phone responding

to requests and fielding inquiries. Whenever new sources of information surface, Dr. Richard Lieberman and members of the staff arrange for oral histories and for on-site photographs. The collection of primary material begins to shape the themes of the exhibit and the focus of the learning package. In developing the work package, we interviewed the granddaughter of a midwife, a piano tuner with 50 years experience in Steinway and Sons, and members of a black family who had lived continuously in the local area for almost 100 years.

The production of materials requires delicate attention and a myriad of details. The staff consists largely of community college trained personnel: one secretary, one research associate full time, one part time administrative assistant and research assistant. The recurrence of deadlines (a major exhibit and seminar each month) forces all personnel to be generalists and it is a "pitch in" operation at all times without regard to status or title. At times the ambiance is one of an opening night frenzy, at other times it is the joy and sharing of discovery: a marvelous picture of a 1910 candy factory, the forceps of a 19th century midwife or housing maps of 1903.

Evaluators are present at the seminar and they conduct field interviews to determine the amount of learning derived and other attitudinal reactions to the presentation. As a rule, we invite a colleague, trained in social and urban history to "critique" the presentation and provide a written feedback for future refinement of the package and the presentation.

After that, the process begins all over again. The project design provides for six to eight exhibits followed by seminars.

Each exhibit features a theme of social and urban history, work, housing, entertainment, family and transportation. After the initial presentation each exhibit travels to tour other sites.

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